



IN DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANS

July 12, 2021

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing on The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe
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Virtual, via Cisco WebEx

STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

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Co-chairs McGovern and Smith,

We express our gratitude to you both for convening this hearing. We wish to refer this statement to the July 13th hearing on the State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

In Defense of Christians (IDC) extends our appreciation to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for continued support for international religious freedom and for Christians who are persecuted for their faith in the very land where Christianity began and elsewhere across the globe. The work of this commission has helped secure the 2016 recognition of the genocide committed by the Islamic State against Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, and has helped amplify advocacy and awareness to deliver much-needed assistance to those genocide survivors. However, religious freedom violations remain a norm for far too many Christians and other faithful across the globe.

China's war against religion leaves no stone unturned. China's 97 million plus Christians are forced between choosing to attend a government-sanctioned church with Communist Party-approved clergy or underground churches that the government targets to close. China's new facial recognition technology also is providing the government with unprecedented access to monitor the religious practices of their citizens and even "grade" them accordingly. It is right

that the U.S. has recognized that China is committing a genocide against Uighur Muslims, but much more must be done to confront the threat that the Chinese Communist Party poses to the faithful.¹

The mass atrocities in Tigray have been described by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a genocide. Disturbingly, churches and other houses of worship have been the epicenters for disturbing acts of violence. In particular, on November 28 and 29, 2020, Eritrean soldiers massacred over 800 people in Aksum, the holiest city for Christians in Ethiopia.²

In Nigeria, there is also an ongoing genocide of Christians. According to Gregory Stanton of Genocide Watch, more than 27,000 Christians have died since 2009 at the hands of Fulani militants, Boko Haram and other Islamic militias there—exceeding the number of ISIS casualties in Iraq and Syria.³ Roman Catholic Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto has charged that the government has “created the conditions to make it possible for Boko Haram to act with near impunity.”⁴

Iran’s domestic religious freedom violations are among the most alarming in the world. Additionally, Iran’s network of proxy militias and terrorist organizations across the Middle East pose a threat to peaceful religious coexistence across the region and spread religious intolerance. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has noted that the Houthis regularly post the slogan “a curse on the Jews” throughout areas they govern. In Iraq, they note that only 50 percent of Christians who survived, and were displaced by, the ISIS genocide, have been able to return to their homes in the historic Nineveh Plains because of the presence of Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Hezbollah in Lebanon poses a direct threat to the most religiously pluralistic country in the region. If Lebanon becomes a failed state, the February 26 assassination of vocal Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim is indicative of the future of free speech in what was once considered the “Paris of the Middle East.”

Saudi Arabia may perhaps be the worst violator of religious freedom in the world. Secretary of State Antony Blinken correctly stated that it is the only country in the world without

¹ Toufic Baaklini and Thomas Farr, “Persecuted Christians Need You Now More Than Ever,” *Providence Magazine*. April 12, 2020. Available at <https://providencemag.com/2020/04/persecuted-christians-need-you-now-more-than-ever/>.

² “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: How a massacre in the sacred city of Aksum unfolded,” BBC News. February 26, 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56198469>.

³ Timothy Cardinal Dolan and Toufic Baaklini, “Remember the Persecuted at Christmas,” *The Wall Street Journal*. December 16, 2020. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/remember-the-persecuted-at-christmas-11608160963>.

⁴ “Stop the Christian Genocide in Nigeria,” Frank Wolf and Toufic Baaklini, *The National Catholic Register*. February 26, 2020. Available at <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/stop-the-christian-genocide-in-nigeria>; Fionn Shiner, “Nigeria: Government Are Islamic Fundamentalists Without Bombs, says Bishop,” *Aid to the Church in Need*. January 3, 2020. Available at <https://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-government-are-islamic-fundamentalists-without-bombs-says-bishop/>.

a Christian church despite being home to over one million Christians.⁵ In 2019, the Kingdom executed over 37 Shia Muslim protestors, including minors. Atheist blogger Raif Badawi has been imprisoned since 2012 for merely sharing his opinions on social media, such as “Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists are all equal.” The Kingdom has received an indefinite waiver, since 2004, from sanctions it rightfully deserves under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. Secretary Blinken should make history by revoking the waiver.⁶

Before 2003, Iraq’s Christian population numbered over 1.5 million. Today, they number less than 250,000 due to sectarianism and genocide. The 2021 visit of Pope Francis injected much hope within this community, however numerous obstacles remain. While the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided over \$389 million to ISIS genocide survivors, a long term genocide response strategy from the U.S. government is desperately needed.⁷

H.Res.117 - Supporting Coptic Christians in Egypt, introduced by Rep. French Hill (R-AR) and co-sponsored by Rep. David Cicilline (D-RI), highlights the current persecution faced by Coptic Christians in Egypt. This community, which numbers over 10 million, is the largest religious minority community in the entire Middle East. Despite preserving the indiginous heritage of Egypt, Coptic Christians continue to suffer as second class citizens. There remains an anti-Christian gag rule when it comes to employment, and Christians remain unable to serve in high level security positions or even play on the national soccer team. Copts remain unable to constructively participate in Egyptian civil society. For example, Ramy Kamel, a Coptic Christian human rights researcher, has officially been imprisoned for over a year on trumped-up charges of terrorism merely because he researches persecution and advocates for the rights of Copts. Senators Chris Coons (D-DE) and Thom Tillis (R-NC), bipartisan co-chairs of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, have written to the Egyptian embassy to call for Kamel’s release.⁸

Despite denying the genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire against Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Arameans and Maronites, Turkish President Recep

⁵ “IDC Commends State Department for Publication of 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom,” *In Defense of Christians*. May 13, 2021. Available at <https://indefenseofchristians.org/idc-commends-state-department-for-publication-of-2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>.

⁶ Steven Howard, “Joe Biden Must Push Saudi Arabia on Human Rights,” *The National Interest*. January 11, 2021. Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/joe-biden-must-push-saudi-arabia-human-rights-176189>.

⁷ Steven Howard, “Biden can build on Pope Francis’s visit to Iraq,” *The Hill*. March 4, 2021. Available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/541135-biden-can-build-on-pope-franciss-visit-to-iraq>.

⁸ Sara Salama and Steven Howard, “Egypt Must Secure Minority Rights before Celebrating Religious Freedom,” *Providence Magazine*. March 9, 2021. Available at <https://providencemag.com/2021/03/egypt-must-secure-minority-rights-celebrating-religious-freedom/>; Laura Kelly, “Bipartisan pair of Senators call on Egypt to address case of imprisoned human rights advocate,” *The Hill*. November 19, 2020. Available at <https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/526806-bipartisan-pair-of-senators-call-on-egypt-to>.

Tayyip Erdogan has referred to Turkey's post-genocide Christian population as "remnants of the sword."⁹ He was also appropriately condemned by the State Department on May 18, 2021 for anti-Semitic comments. Not coincidentally, Turkey's small Jewish community is fleeing the country due to increased anti-Semitism. Despite strong condemnations from the international community, Erdogan converted two historic Christian places of worship, the Hagia Sophia and the Chora Church, into mosques. Despite providing no evidence to suggest such claims, Turkey has charged Father Sefer Aho Bilecen, the sole caretaker of the Syriac Orthodox Monastery of Saint Jacob in Tur Abdin in southeastern Turkey, with terrorism for providing bread and water to strangers.

Turkey's 2019 invasion of Northern Syria resulted in widespread human rights violations. Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad warned in 2020 that "Turkish-backed militias are silently carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Yazidis in Afrin."¹⁰ Amy Austin Holmes, writing for the Council on Foreign Relations, has found that there have been over 800 violations by Turkey of the US-brokered ceasefire in northeastern Syria (including over 138 violations in Christian region of Tel Tamer) after its first year.¹¹ In October 2019, three members of the Syriac Military Council (MFS) in northeastern Syria were kidnapped by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). They were transported across an international border into Turkey, in violation of Article 49 of the 4th Geneva Convention. Moreover, they were tortured, and forced to sign admissions of guilt in Turkish without translations or the assistance of translators. In late June 2021, they were sentenced to life in Turkish prison.¹² Turkey has even transported the jihadist militias it has supported in Syria to Azerbaijan to fight against the ancient Armenian Christian community of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh), which has resulted in a number of human rights abuses (including the use of precision-guided missiles to target the Armenian Orthodox Christian Cathedral in Shusha).¹³

The most imminent threat that Middle Eastern Christians face, when it comes to fleeing the very region from which the faith was born, is the current crisis in Lebanon. Saint John Paul II

⁹ Uzey Bulut, "Turkey: Erdogan uses 'Leftovers of the Sword' anti-Christian hate speech," *Genocide Watch*. May 11, 2020. Available at <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/2020/05/11/Turkey-Erdogan-uses-Leftovers-of-the-Sword-anti-Christian-hate-speech>.

¹⁰ Nadia Murad, Tweet. May 29, 2020. Available at <https://twitter.com/NadiaMuradBasee/status/1266373588883398657?s=20>.

¹¹ Amy Austin Holmes, "Despite Ceasefire Agreement, Turkey Implicated In More Than Eight Hundred Violations," *Council on Foreign Relations*. October 13, 2020. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/despite-ceasefire-agreement-turkey-implicated-more-eight-hundred-violations>.

¹² "Three members of Syriac Military Council illegally tried and imprisoned in Turkey, given life sentences for 'disrupting unity of Turkish state,'" *Syriac Press*. June 29, 2021. Available at <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2021/06/29/three-members-of-syriac-military-council-illegally-tried-and-imprisoned-in-turkey-two-given-life-sentences-for-disrupting-unity-of-turkish-state/>.

¹³ Alex Galitsky and Steven Howard, "Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide makes it clear: Turkey will be held accountable for human rights violations," *America Magazine*. April 23, 2021. Available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/04/23/biden-armenian-genocide-turkey-human-rights-violations-240520>; Steven Howard "Government Report Signals Hope for Middle Eastern Christians," *Providence Magazine*. May 14, 2021. Available at <https://providencemag.com/2021/05/government-report-signals-hope-middle-eastern-christians-uscirf/>.

referred to Lebanon as a message of pluralism and coexistence. Iran, via Hezbollah, is on the verge of toppling a religiously pluralistic democratic U.S. ally. Endemic corruption and foreign interference are driving Lebanon towards failed state status at a rapid rate. Before the August 4, 2020 explosion in the Port of Beirut, protestors filled the streets in protest of the government's corruption. In the aftermath of that explosion, Turkey has been increasing its presence and influence in the land of the cedars. At Iran's behest, Russia and China are also becoming increasingly involved in Lebanon. Christian-Muslim conviviality is organic to Lebanon, but the foreign powers seeking to spread their influence in Lebanon are willing to stop at nothing, even weaponizing Lebanon's sects against one another, to get there.¹⁴

A World Bank report indicates that the economic crisis in Lebanon may be one of the top three most severe economic crises since the mid 19th century. The Lebanese economy is projected to shrink from \$60 million in 2018 and to \$15 million in 2021, the unemployment rate is a shocking 40%, and half of the Lebanese population is below the poverty line.

The Patriarch of the Maronite Church of Antioch, Cardinal Boutros al-Rai, who represents the largest Christian population in the country, has been championing the concept of "Active Neutrality" to insulate Lebanon from the widespread instability across the Middle East, and prevent it from becoming the next battleground between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. The Patriarch has also called on the United Nations to intervene to pressure Lebanese lawmakers to form a responsible, accountable government, thereby addressing Lebanon's imminent threat of collapse. Active neutrality and responsible governance will give Lebanon, the region's last free bastion of Christianity, a fighting chance at survival and stability.

We encourage the commission to carry on with its vital work and reiterate our deepest gratitude to the co-chairs and all members for their commitment to human rights.

With deepest appreciation,

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¹⁴ Bishop Gregory Mansour and Toufic Baaklini, "How Pope Francis Reminds Us of Good Friday and Easter Sunday," *Providence Magazine*. April 2, 2021. Available at <https://providencemag.com/2021/04/pope-francis-reminds-us-good-friday-easter-sunday-middle-east-africa-christians/>.